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ABSTRACT

Although modern discourse theory asserts that purpose is most fundamental to writing, it is genuine intention that students' writing most often lacks. Assigned topics compel students to write when the occasion is not genuine and there is no real opportunity to communicate. Research indicates that the two principal modes of writing are extensive, focusing on the writer's conveying a message or communication to another, and reflexive, focusing on the writer's thoughts and feelings about an experience. The processes of extensive composing, mostly school-sponsored, are linear and direct, proceeding from prewriting to writing to revision in discrete lock-steps. The processes of reflexive composing, mostly self-sponsored, are more like those described by professional writers and involve moving back and forth through all stages of the writing process. While both strategies are part of a full writing process, the former has resulted in the artificial, truncated writing of many students. Other research shows that good writing takes time, but teachers have not recognized this in teaching writing and the results have been a distorted fixation on product instead of on process. Allowing students choice of topic and more time for the process results in stronger, more interesting, and more correct writing. (TJ)

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What Empirical Research Reveals about Topics and Writing Processes

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Modern discourse theory asserts that purpose is most fundamental to writing. According to Kinneavey (1971): "The aim of a discourse determines everything else in the process..." (p. 48). And addressing their own version of the student writing crisis, the Bullock Committee in Britain reached a similar conclusion, "that a writer's intention is prior to (her) need for techniques" (DES, 1975, p. 104). And yet, it is genuine intention which students' writing most often lacks and to which instruction has most often failed to attend. Student writers more often attend to their instructor's purposes than their own. In their attempt to adopt their instructor's prescriptions for form, students fail to recognize the form inherent in the emergence of their own ideas; in fact, they rarely get that far. The very nature of assignments deprives them of the opportunity to examine their own ideas and experience, so locked are they into reproducing someone else's: teacher's or test's. The results are the tortured essays which, as Janet Emig (1964) has observed, "seem to be written from one layer of the self - the ectoderm only" (p. 6).

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Assigned topics put the student at a terrible disadvantage, compelling her to write when she is not compelled to write. The occasion is not genuine; the resulting processes are therefore artificial. Donald Murray (1978) has defined writing as "the process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it" (p. 86). Most school-assigned writing, however, permits neither a search for meaning nor a real opportunity to communicate. The writer's audience already knows what is to be written; in fact, she generally knows more about it than the writer.

James Britton's research team found that the vast majority of school writing of British 11 to 18 year olds, almost 90%, was directed towards teachers. Most scripts fell into what the researchers called the "pupil to examiner" category; that is, most of the writings were perceived by students as tests even when not designated as such by their teachers. An analysis of function revealed that more than 60% of the scripts were assigned to the "transactional" category, that mode in which the writer seeks to give information, to report, or to record. Of these, most were concerned with the classification of information. (Britton et al., 1975).

Although no such comprehensive study of audience and function has been conducted in America to date, investigators of students' composing processes have reached similar conclusions. The pioneering effort was Janet Emig's (1971) study of the

composing processes of twelfth graders. Her data was drawn from interviews, observations, and taped recordings of students' "oral composing" (a technique in which writers expressed orally their thoughts and feelings as they composed). Emig uncovered significant differences btween the processes of students engaged in "school-sponsored" and "self-sponsored" writing. According to Emig, writing occurs in two principal modes: the extensive, "the mode that focuses upon the writer's conveying a message or a communication to another", and the reflexive, "the mode that focuses upon the writer's thoughts and feelings concerning (her) experiences." Writing in the two modes differed in pace and style. Extensive, or school-sponsored, writing was "assured, impersonal and often reportorial." Reflexive, or self-sponsored, writing was "tentative, personal and exploratory" (p.4).

The processes of extensive composing were observed to be linear and direct, proceeding from pre-writing to writing to revision in discrete lock-steps. The processes of reflexive composing were more like those described by the professional writer, as Donald Murray (1978) has put it, "too experimental and exploratory to be contained in a rigid definition; writers move back and forth through all stages of the writing process as they search for meaning and then attempt to clarify it" (p. 86).

Students' committment to school and self-sponsored writing also differed. They rarely showed school-related

to anyone but their teachers. For self-sponsored writing, they frequently sought out others, particularly peers who themselves wrote. Pre-writing was significantly longer, in one case described by Emig, as much as two years. Most significant was a difference in rewriting strategies. In self-sponsored, reflexive composing, students reformulated more, revising more readily. In school-sponsored, extensive composing, students were chiefly concerned with minor surface corrections and with the amenities of communication. Their texts changed little.

These differences in the writer's approach to her text appear to have a developmental dimension. Donald Graves' (1975) study of the composing processes of seven year olds identified two types of writers: reactives and reflectives. Reactive writers tended to rehearse before writing by either drawing a picture or through conversation; they lacked a sense of audience and seldom contemplated their finished products. Reflective writers rehearsed little, periodically reread, showed a greater awareness of audience and more often contemplated their finished work.

Studies of older writers suggest that the degree to which she reflects is related to the writer's success. Stallard's (1974) study of twelfth graders indicated that good writers spend more time in pre-writing and at actual composing than poor writers. The also tended to be slower in their processes, revising more. Good writers were also more concerned with purposes than were poor writers. Sharon Pianko (1979) reached

similar conclusions in a comparison of the composing of college freshmen assigned, on the basis of pre-testing, to traditional and remedial courses. However, her data also indicated that these differences, although in some dimensions statistically significant, were overall slight. Whether "traditional" or "remedial," all students studied showed little commitment to writing. Prewriting was extremely brief. All but two subjects wrote no more than a single draft, and although they were told that they had an entire afternoon to write each paper assigned, the mean composing time was 40 minutes.

The processes of most student writers are significantly different from those of professional writers and from those of student writers when they write for themselves. Experienced writers testify that they revise extensively. Donald Murray (1978) goes so far as to say that "writing is rewriting" (p. 85). But it is not just revision itself that makes the crucial difference; it is the form that it takes. Murray distinguishes between internal and external revision. Internal revision comes first and occupies much more of the writer's time. It is concerned not with surface correctness but with discovery, as Murray puts it, "with questions of subject, of adequate information, of structure, of form, of language" (p. 92). External revision comes later, when writers, satisfied with what they have found, turn to polishing and become "concerned with exterior appearances" (p. 91).

Richard Beach (1976) rated the composing of college juniors and seniors according to the degree to which they revised among drafts and asked writers to comment on these drafts as they were written. Extensive revisiors were concerned primarily with making changes in the content of their drafts, considered their first draft as tentative, in need of clarification and reformulation. They tended to view their papers in wholistic terms and could generalize about different aspects of their drafts and were thus able to predict changes in subsequent versions. They were far more successful than non-revisors in detaching themselves from their work and could achieve an "aesthetic distance." Non-revisors were chiefly concerned throughout their writing with surface features of their texts.

Preliminary findings of my own current research, an examination of hemispheric activity relationships in the brain during composing (Glassner, in press), suggest that these distinct strategies are accompaned by differences in the engagement of the left and right cerebral hemispheres. Extensive composing, more linear, conscious and analytic in execution, appears to be more of a left-brained activity. Reflexive composing, focused upon discovering meanings, tentative and exploratory, and more wholistic in orientation, is accompanied by greater relative engagemern of the right cerebral hemisphere. This distinction was found to be independent of assignment or task. Whether recounting a closely-felt

personal experience or describing a process, how something is done or made, those writers who were communicating information already familiar or previously formulated in talking or writing showed strategies of extensive, left-brained composing. Those who used their writing to formulate ideas not previously expressed showed strategies more characteristic of reflexive composing with a greater relative engagement of their right hemispheres.

Both strategies appear to be part of a full writing process, but instruction has traditionally addressed only one, and it has resulted in the artificial, truncated and half-brained composing behaviors of most students. Although a full writing process takes considerable time, the teacher of writing has rarely been willing to provide it. Beset by the concerns of a community forever alarmed by one literacy crisis or another, English teachers are impatient for successful texts. Their training has prepared them for little else. But good teaching is ot born of such impatience. If students are ever to learn to write, to use langue as a personal tool for discovery and for learning, they must be given the opportunity to, as James Moffett (1965) has put it, "abstract from the ground up" (p. 247).

If the recent examinations of composing processes tell us anything, it is that good writing takes time, lots of it. They also show that teachers have rarely recognized

this and that the results have been disasterous. Our profession's fixation with products rather than processes has led to dangeroud distortions. Skilled performance, according to phdlpksopher Michael Polyani (1958) is "achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known, as such, to the person following them" (p. p. 49). Yet traditional writing instruction reduces the complex, multi-faceted and highly personal acts of composing to neat formulas, straightfoward and wholly conscious.

Our attempts to provide students with topics has contributed to this truncation of process, further limiting its natural evolution. Although teacher's instincts have been right (students' problems are linked to their failure to address topics which stimulate careful reflection), composing research asserts that it is not the teacher's task to provide them; rather, that search is a crucial part of the writers's own processes.

Rather than providing students with topics, we must assist them in seeking them. We must become what Donald Murray (1979) has called "The LIstening Eye." To be successful, a writer must have expertise in her subject; she must know more than her reader; she must have something to share. Those are subjects which we can't provide, but we do know them when we see them. To be successful, a writer must have a genuine purpose. An assignment is certainly not enough. As John Dewey once pointed out, "There is all the

difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something."

Research in composing processes is quite young; we have much to explore. But we have begun to acquire some empricial evidence about the effects of teaching which permits students to explore their experience in writing. Graves (1975) found that informal classrooms which provided more freedom of choice resulted in more writing. Children wrote more frequently and at greater length than when assignments were made. Graves concluded that assignments inhibit the range, content and amount of seven year olds' writing. This was confirmed by Melas (1974) who found that teachers' assignments do not oftten match the interests of second, third and fourth graders.

That student choice of topic and the opportunity to engage in longer wriitng processes results in significantly stronger writing has also been shown among older students by Sanders and Littlefield (1975). While pre- and post-tests on impromptu assigned topics showed no improvement over a semester of freshman composition, similar tests in which students could select their own topics and could research them before coming to class did show improvement and were rated higher on two scales for expository writing.

In the past few years, I have learned much from my students - how to shoe a horse, what it is like raising

a severely retarded child, how a thirteen year old came to earn $5,000 a week pushing heroin in Harlem and how he spent it, what it is like giving shaves and haircuts in a barber school on New York's Bowery, how a ten year old developed a crippling asthma after being told that he was the man in the family following his father's death, how a marriage ended when a P.O.W. returned home to find his wife an independent, self-sufficient and educated woman, and what it is like seeing one's father slowly and painfully deteriorate as cancer takes his life.

My students have learned a great deal more - about themselves and about writing. I have had to spend far less time teaching mechanics and form. My students write complete and complex sentences (although I sometimes must help them see where to punctuate them). They write complete and interesting paragraphs (although I sometimes must help them see that they have). I have found that by writing fewer products in a semester, my students write much more than ever before covering a wider range of discourse than I could ever have hoped to assign.

My students more readily and energetically research when they recognize the need for themselves. One student in my class last year, for example, had shown his writing group a scathing attack on the college's financial aid office. One of his fellow writing group members took offense; he had worked there the previous year and insisted that Chuck

had it all wrong. He took him to the office and introduced him to the staff. Chuck was so surprised by what her learned, he decided that others should know where the problems lay. In the course of writing what would become a letter to the editor of the college paper, Chuck interviewed several members of the staff as well as the director.

The most important lesson I've learned from adjusting my teaching to composing processes has been that there have been important occasions for writing that would have gone unattended had my students not been actively engaged in the search for topics. One student who was having difficulty understanding her psychology course showed me that, despite my protests, the principles of operant conditioning could be applied to my instruction. Her grades improved in psychology as well. And one of the finest pieces of student writing I have ever seen was written by a second-language student in my class last year. Pierre came to class one day, his journal full of stories his grandfather, a survivor of the Armenian holocaust, had told him as a child. The grandfather had died a few days before, and Pierre, unable to return to France for the funeral, had spent his mourning period getting them down. Sharing some of what he had written with his writing group, he was appalled by American students' ignorance of his people's tragic history. Before beginning work on a paper relating his grandfather's story of how he, with 21 others managed to be the sole survivors of

the slaughter of Diarbaker, a town of 200,00, Pierre worked in the library so that he could provide an historical framework for his classmates. By the end of the semester, Pierre, never particularly religious, was haunting local Armenian churches in search of others who could recall stories from the same period. Last week, I got a call from Pierre. A publisher is interested in his manuscript.

Perhaps we can't expect all of cur students to be as committed or as successful as Pierre, but we can help them become writers; we can help them experience genuine authorship. They all have special knowledge and experience to share with others. We have only to help them to find it, to explore it, and then to shape it.

If we are to succeed, we must become readers as well as teachers. We must become writers as well. We must respect writing not only for its ability to communicate, but also for its ability to reveal. Students and teachers together must come to appreciate the complex relationship between thought and language, to experience what Vygotsky (1962) has asserted: "Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them" (p. 125).

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